

# Guide to Proposal Development<sup>1</sup>

This discussion is intended to help you conceive and write a stronger proposal by alerting you to the ways in which it will be read and judged. We recognize that some of the considerations raised here may not pertain to your particular project, and the following remarks are not intended to oblige you to organize your proposal around direct responses to all of them.

## **Before You Prepare an Application**

Because of FIPSE's broad eligibility criteria and expansive programmatic interests, the Comprehensive Program receives a large number of preliminary proposals each year. The preliminary proposal process is designed to be inclusive, to encourage submission of meritorious ideas. Only a brief narrative is required, covered by a title page and a budget sheet. But the task of composing the preliminary proposal is not an easy one, and its quality will determine whether an applicant is invited to prepare a final proposal. Of those proposals invited into the final round of the competition (15-20%), FIPSE is able to fund one in every three or four. Although the Comprehensive Program is certainly competitive, applicants new to federal grantsmanship should not be discouraged. Almost half of FIPSE's current project directors have never before directed a federal grant, and only one in ten has previously been in charge of a FIPSE project. About one-quarter of each year's awards go to applicants who did not receive a grant on their first attempt, but who used the external reviews and conversations with FIPSE staff to prepare an improved proposal in a subsequent year.

FIPSE is a federal program and therefore takes a national perspective in its grantmaking. Both the importance of a project and the innovation represented by its proposed solution are therefore considered in relation to the needs of the postsecondary community as a whole. Applicants are advised to describe the problem or opportunity they wish to address in both its local and national contexts. Is it common to a number of other postsecondary institutions besides your own? Does it affect a substantial number of students at those institutions? If it affects a relatively small number, is the problem so serious that it jeopardizes their ability to succeed in postsecondary education, or the opportunity so great that it can transform their learning?

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<sup>1</sup>This program information is intended to aid applicants in applying for assistance under this competition. Nothing in this application package is intended to impose any paperwork, application content, reporting, or grantee performance requirement beyond those specifically imposed under the statute and regulations governing the competition.

Model programs addressing many common issues of postsecondary reform already exist. Some have been developed with the support of FIPSE or other funding agencies; many others were implemented without any outside grant support. Applicants are encouraged to begin their search for solutions by examining what others have done to address the issue or problem of concern, and to adapt appropriate current models wherever possible. It is when your research indicates that there are no appropriate models, or that current models can be substantially improved, that you should consider an application to FIPSE. We will welcome your ideas.

FIPSE's World Wide Web site (<http://www.ed.gov/FIPSE>) contains information resources that would be useful to a prospective applicant in developing a proposal. One of these is *Lessons Learned*, an occasional FIPSE publication, containing descriptions and results of many well evaluated FIPSE projects. The website also has descriptions of all currently funded projects, evaluation information and suggestions, material on other competitions, and funding advice from FIPSE program officers.

Prospective applicants should note that, although we do not review draft proposals, FIPSE program officers are happy to discuss project ideas by telephone or in person, particularly in the summer and fall before the preliminary proposal stage begins. Call the FIPSE office to set up an appointment.

### **The Review Process**

In order to evaluate efficiently a broad range of proposals, the Comprehensive Program's review process consists of two stages—the first involving the preliminary proposal (a five-page, double-spaced narrative and a summary budget), and the second involving the final proposal (a twenty-five-page, double-spaced narrative, a budget, and a budget narrative).

**Preliminary Proposals.** Preliminary proposals are first examined by a group of external reviewers, identified each year from among faculty, administrators, or other professionals across the country, and chosen for their understanding of a broad range of issues in postsecondary education. A new group of readers is selected each year. Staff then carefully consider both the proposal and the reader reviews, and recommend which applicants should be invited to submit final proposals.

Your preliminary proposal should give external reviewers and staff a concrete understanding of the problem you are addressing and the solutions you propose, including a brief description of how you will evaluate the results. As noted above, it should be clear how your project strategy differs from and improves upon current practice at your institution and elsewhere in the nation.

Applicants should note that, at the preliminary proposal stage, external reviewers may or may not be experts on the particular topics of your grant application. It is therefore important to write the proposal narrative for an audience of generalists, using clear, direct language and avoiding jargon, clichés, and acronyms whenever possible. Given the volume of submissions, the preliminary proposal narrative must be limited to five double-spaced pages, or approximately 1,250 words. We recommend that no appendices or letters of recommendation be submitted at this stage.

**Final Proposals.** If you are invited to submit a final proposal, a FIPSE program officer will discuss with you by telephone both the external reviewers' and the staff's reactions to your preliminary application, and will remain available to answer questions and offer suggestions to assist you in strengthening the final proposal.

Final proposals are also read by at least two outside reviewers, including specialists in your subject. Additional experts may review proposals when technical questions arise, and FIPSE's National Board may discuss them. FIPSE staff then carefully read and discuss the proposals and the external reviews. Project directors of the most competitive applications are telephoned to clarify information about their projects. Staff may also contact others who know the applicant's work and plans, or who will be affected by the project.

Again at the final proposal stage, it is important to present your ideas in clear language that will help readers to understand precisely what you intend to do and how you will do it. Your final proposal narrative should not exceed 25 double-spaced pages, or approximately 6,250 words.

*To ensure that all applicants enjoy the same opportunity to present their ideas, please conform to the page limitations noted above, use minimum 1-inch margins, and avoid font sizes smaller than 11 points.*

### **Selection Criteria**

Our intent in this section is to help applicants understand how the selection criteria are applied during the preliminary and final review stages. FIPSE does not separate proposals rigidly by types of activities, sectors of postsecondary education or other fixed categories, nor does it assign specific amounts of its budget to the priority areas described in the Agenda for Improvement. Instead, in our desire to identify the most significant issues and feasible plans, we compare each proposal to all others, using the criteria described below.

Each selection criterion is presented in bold type, and followed by a discussion of how it applies to the competition. The external readers and staff

reviewers of your proposal use these criteria to guide their reviews at both stages of the Comprehensive Program competition, so it is in your interest to be familiar with them. The final decision on an application is based on an overall assessment of the extent to which it satisfactorily addresses all the selection criteria, which are weighted equally.

**Preliminary proposals will be considered according to the following criteria, weighted equally:**

**1) The need for the project**, as determined by the following factors:

- a) the magnitude or severity of the problem addressed by the project; and
- b) the magnitude of the need for the services to be provided or the activities to be carried out by the project.

You should describe the nature and magnitude of the problem or opportunity you wish to address, in both its local setting and a national context. The Agenda for Improvement in this booklet identifies some areas of needed reform, but you may choose to focus on a topic not specifically mentioned in these guidelines, or you may choose to address more than one topic in a single project.

How central is the problem you have identified to your institution's vitality or the effectiveness of your educational services? Does the same problem affect other institutions around the country? Have attempts to remedy the situation been made by you or by others in the past, and with what results? What will be the local and national consequences of a successful completion of your project? Are other institutions or organizations likely to benefit or learn from your experience in ways that would enable them to improve their own programs and services?

Note that FIPSE does not support basic research; rather, its focus is on implementation projects designed to test new approaches to improvement and reform.

**2) The significance of the project**, as determined by the following factors:

- a) the potential contribution of the proposed project to increased knowledge or understanding of educational problems, issues, or effective strategies;
- b) the extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies;

c) the importance or magnitude of the results or outcomes likely to be attained by the proposed project, especially improvements in teaching and student achievement; and

d) the potential replicability of the proposed project, including its potential for implementation in a variety of settings.

Reviewers will appreciate any evidence you can include to illustrate how your project differs from and improves upon previous efforts. Describe the potential contribution of your project to increasing the postsecondary community's knowledge about effective reform strategies, and the likely utility of the products (such as information, materials, processes, or techniques) that will result from it. It is the applicant's responsibility to set a context within which reviewers can assess the project's importance to postsecondary education reform.

Directly or indirectly, learners should be the principal beneficiaries of your project. This means, for example, that faculty development proposals should articulate the relationship between what the faculty will experience and what their students will learn. Our focus on the learner also means that FIPSE is especially interested in evaluation plans that assess projects in terms of their consequences for student learning.

FIPSE seeks to make the most of its limited funds by supporting projects that can become models for others in postsecondary education. Applicants should discuss the potential replicability of the proposed project, and its potential for implementation elsewhere. Before a project can become a model, however, its proponents must be able to prove that it has achieved its aims in its original setting. That is why a solid evaluation plan, one that focuses as much as possible on precisely how the project has helped students to become better educated, is an essential component of FIPSE projects.

Keep in mind that, if your project activities are heavily dependent on external funding, it will be very difficult for other institutions to adapt them on their own, and this may reduce the potential impact of your project.

**3) The quality of the project's design**, as determined by the extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.

Your strategies should be carefully designed to address the central causes of the problem you are addressing, based on your own research and experience, and based on previous experiments by others. Scatter-shot approaches to vaguely-defined problems make poor prospects for funding.

**4) The quality of the project's evaluation**, as determined by the extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.

Evaluation should be an important part of your project planning, and your preliminary proposal should include a brief description of how you intend to document the activities and results of your project. (In the final proposal we ask for a specific section on evaluation in which you state your objectives clearly and present the details of your evaluation design.)

**Final proposals will be considered in light of the above criteria and their factors and the following additional ones, all weighted equally:**

**5) The quality of the project's design**, as determined by the following *additional* factors:

- a) the extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable; and
- b) the extent to which the design for implementing and evaluating the proposed project will result in information to guide possible replication of project activities or strategies, including information about the effectiveness of the approach or strategies employed by the project.

Your narrative should offer reviewers a clear description of who will do what, when, where, why, and with what anticipated results. The project's goals and objectives should be clearly identified and measurable.

All proposed projects should include plans for disseminating their findings. There are many ways of informing others of a project's results, and of helping others make use of your experience. In reviewing plans for dissemination or adaptation, we ask whether the methods proposed are appropriate for the project in question and whether they improve upon methods used elsewhere.

Some projects are themselves efforts to disseminate proven approaches to reform. If the central purpose of your project is dissemination, please review the discussion under "Dissemination of Successful Innovations" in the Agenda for Improvement section of this application package.

**6) The quality of the project evaluation**, as determined by the following *additional* factors:

- a) the extent to which the methods of evaluation are thorough, feasible, and appropriate to the goals, objectives, and outcomes of the proposed project; and

b) the extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible.

Formative evaluation can help you manage your project more effectively, and a strong summative evaluation, especially if it documents the project's effects on the learner, can turn a successful project into a national model for improvement in postsecondary education. As you develop your evaluation plan, place yourself in the position of the recipient of your final evaluation report. What would count as solid quantitative and qualitative evidence that your project had succeeded, or failed? It may be difficult, within the term of the grant, to assess accomplishment of long-range objectives, but you should be able to identify some short-term indicators. Bear in mind that the goals of local institutionalization and wider impact may well elude you unless you can provide solid evidence that your project is achieving its aims. Developing such evidence should not be put off until the last stages of a project. It must be a consideration from the design stage onward.

FIPSE provides a short bibliography of books and articles on program evaluation to assist you with evaluation design. These references clarify formative and summative evaluation. They address evidence, measurement, and sampling questions, and discuss the immediate and long-range outcomes you can expect, based on your project objectives. This bibliography is available on FIPSE's website, or by telephone or mail request to the FIPSE office.

**7) The quality of the management plan**, as determined by the plan's adequacy to achieve the objectives of the proposed project on time and within budget, including clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, and milestones for accomplishing project tasks.

**8) The quality of project personnel**, as determined by the following factors:

a) the qualifications, including training and experience, of key project personnel; and

b) the extent to which the applicant encourages applications for employment from persons who are members of groups that have traditionally been underrepresented based on race, color, national origin, gender, age, or disability.

The qualifications of key personnel, including the project director and any consultants or subcontractors, should be briefly outlined in an appendix to the final proposal. Please note that a standard curriculum vitae is usually not appropriate for this purpose. What is needed is a brief (two pages maximum)

narrative summary of each individual's background, with a special focus on those experiences related to the topic of your application.

**9) The adequacy of resources for the proposed project**, as determined by the following factors:

- a) the extent to which the budget is adequate to support the proposed project;
- b) the extent to which costs are reasonable in relation to the objectives, design, and potential significance of the proposed project;
- c) the demonstrated commitment of each partner in the proposed project to the implementation and success of the project;
- d) the adequacy of support, including facilities, equipment, supplies, and other resources from the applicant organization; and
- e) the potential for continued support of the project after Federal funding ends, including the demonstrated commitment of appropriate entities to such support.

It should be clear that you have carefully allocated appropriate resources and personnel for the tasks and activities described in your proposal. Even at the preliminary proposal stage, it is in the applicant's best interest to prepare an estimated budget carefully. There is no point in jeopardizing the success of the project through insufficient allocation of funds; nor is it helpful to over-estimate its costs to the host institution or to FIPSE. A detailed budget and justification attached to your final proposal should itemize the support you request from FIPSE and the support you expect to obtain from sources other than FIPSE.

FIPSE cannot purchase facilities and it rarely supports equipment purchases. These costs should be included in your institutional contribution.

FIPSE is especially interested in projects designed to be cost-effective, to increase the likelihood that successful efforts may be continued beyond the period of a FIPSE grant, and to be replicated by others. But cost-effectiveness must not imply insufficient resources to accomplish the project's goals and objectives. Costs should be allocated, and will be judged, in comparison to the scope of the project and the requirements for achieving its objectives.

It is important to provide evidence that the plans you propose have the support of those who will authorize them, those who will carry them out, and those who will be affected by them. At the preliminary proposal stage,

it is enough to note such support in your narrative. Final proposals should include, in an appendix, letters of commitment and support from senior



administrators of the host institution, any partners in the project, and, if desired, national experts on the issues addressed in the proposal. Applicants are advised that the quality of letters of support is important, not their quantity.

The applicant institution and any partners should support the project both philosophically and financially. Because FIPSE applicants are often seeking support that will develop or strengthen their own programs or capacities, we expect the host institution and its partners to make a significant commitment to the project in the form of direct cost sharing and low indirect cost rates. FIPSE does not specify a particular percentage of cost-sharing or an indirect rate, however, because the rate proposed is taken as an indication of institutional commitment, and this may vary from institution to institution and from project to project. Some of our applicants request no indirect costs at all. As a reference point, FIPSE staff generally use the U.S. Department of Education training rate of eight percent (8%) of total direct costs as a basis for judgments about reasonable indirect costs.

FIPSE grants are generally used to support the start-up of new programs or activities that are intended to continue after a grant ends. When this is the case, your proposal should have a clear and convincing plan for long-term continuation of the project that includes explicit commitments from those who will be responsible for sustaining the activity. When long-term institutionalization of the project is the goal, it is often desirable to plan for an increasing share of institutional support with declining FIPSE support during the life of the grant.

Because issues of cost are often critical for institutionalization, proposals requiring grant dollars for student financial aid or equipment are rarely competitive. Instead we expect that projects requiring such funds will acquire the money from other sources. Grants cannot be used for the purchase of real property or for construction.

